

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 16, 2006

Contact: Matt Lambert/Jocelyn Rogers
(202) 225-2132

Istook Questions Labor Secretary on Assistance for GM Workers

Secretary Chao praises Istook's efforts, promises to act quickly to aid Oklahoma workers

Washington, DC – Rep. Ernest Istook (R – Warr Acres) today questioned Department of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao about the status of federal assistance to Oklahoma City auto workers and suppliers displaced by the closing of the GM plant.

During a hearing of the Labor, Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee, Istook and Chao discussed the department's plans to help workers transition to new employment.

"I appreciate that you and I had a conversation about the GM situation in December," Istook told Secretary Chao. "And I'm anxious to hear more about what the department is doing to meet the retraining and re-employment needs of these displaced workers. "

"Congressman Istook, I know how concerned you are about this issue," Chao responded. "I know that you and your staff have worked very hard in working with my department to ensure that the federal government and the Department of Labor, in particular, are responsive... to your constituents. You and I have had many discussions about what we can do to help Oklahomans who are going through a very, very tough period in their lifetimes. We thank you for your support, for your clarification. You've been terrific in helping us understand the local situation and know what the specific needs of your state [are].

"[Assistant Secretary for the Employment and Training Administration Emily DeRocco] and I have been talking constantly about how to help Oklahomans ever since we had that phone call and subsequent calls," Chao continued. "Basically, the department has implemented a national response plan, and Oklahoma will be a target, as well, to meet the needs of auto workers. ...We'll galvanize other departments across the federal government [and] coordinate the federal government's response."

Istook countered: "Part of the challenge that we have is the fact that this is the first plant closure. And if a response to the State of Oklahoma has to wait upon the development of a national plan for responding to plants that are still months away from closing, then the needs of our people are delayed. I'm concerned that if Oklahoma's only treated as part of a national response, it's not adequate for meeting the needs of our people. Can you give me some guidance on when we're going to have some action on Oklahoma's application and make sure it doesn't have to wait on the development of a national approach?"

[Oklahoma's application for \$8.8 million in National Emergency Grant funding] came in, and we are looking at it very carefully and very quickly," Chao answered. "And based on this conversation, right after this hearing I'm going to go back to my office and take another look at that application and make sure that Oklahoma receives very speedy help and assistance."

Rep. Istook expressed his appreciation for the secretary's attentiveness, reiterating, "We're the first ones to be hit, and we want to get these people re-employed and back to work and to have the necessary training and educational opportunities that they need."

“We do want to get this rapid response team together,” Chao responded, “and they would offer an array of services for workers, including career counseling, job search assistance, resume preparation, information on local labor markets, unemployment insurance, of course, and information about education, training opportunities, and also how to handle their health benefits and pensions. That team will be ready.”

Istook invited Secretary Chao to send a Department of Labor representative to Oklahoma City to meet directly with those affected by the plant shutdown, to which Chao responded, “We will make that happen.”

Oklahoma City’s GM plant is scheduled to permanently halt production Monday, leaving approximately 2,400 salaried and hourly workers out of a job.

#